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SUBJECT: KMT CHAIRMAN MA YING-JEOU FORGING A NEW
LEADERSHIP STYLE FOLLOWING THE DECEMBER 3 ELECTIONS

1. The following cable is an analysis of public opinion written by one of AIT's senior local employees in the Press Section. She wrote it based on several weeks of monitoring talk shows, newspapers and conversations among her contacts and friends. Rather than edit it into a traditional reporting cable, we found it an interesting reflection of opinions currently held by a large sector of Taiwan's population.

2. Summary: Opposition KMT Chairman Ma Ying-jeou, who took over the helm of the century-old "ossified" party four months ago, has demonstrated a new and distinct leadership style since he started campaigning for the December 3 "3-in-1 elections" of mayors and magistrates in Taiwan, in which the KMT won a landslide victory. In contrast to President Chen Shui-bian's mercurial leadership, Ma's political style is in general gentle, sober and orthodox; he tends to believe in precedents and procedures rather than ad hoc arrangements. But while campaigning for the December 3 elections, the charismatic "Mr. Nice-guy" adopted some surprising and unprecedented campaign strategies, which have not only distinguished him from his KMT predecessors but also turned him into the toughest challenger to the ruling DPP. End summary.

3. Despite President Chen's denial that the December 3 "3-in-1" elections were a vote of no-confidence in the Cabinet or a harbinger of the 2008 presidential elections, Taiwan's media and observers generally viewed the elections as a "mid-term report" for President Chen Shui-bian. Some pro-pan-Blue newspapers also termed the island-wide elections as a "qualifying examination" for KMT Chairman Ma Ying-jeou, since it was Ma's first battle since he took up the reins leading the KMT. The KMT's landslide triumph in the elections indicated Ma had not only passed the exam, but he had also become the most popular political heavyweight in Taiwan politics.

4. Ma, a graduate of Harvard Law School, received a legal education like President Chen. But unlike Chen, whose lawyerly characteristics are clearly manifested in his witty reactions, eloquent rhetoric, and the belief that winning comes above all things, Ma, despite his popularity, has never been a passionate leader or good at stimulating the public's fervor. "His speeches are always safe and stable, seldom inspiring, even when he addresses people at the grassroots level," a "China Times" reporter said. Ma's law-abiding character, clinging to high moral standards, and insistence on doing things the right way make him an extraordinary figure in Taiwan's often scandalous political culture. On the other hand, Ma is often criticized, even by his now deceased father, for his lack of flexibility and innovation.

5. Ma has often been labeled "political Teflon" since his days as the justice minister in the mid-1990s, meaning he has often managed to stay above the fray in Taiwan's back-biting political world. Even though he now works closely with several staff members, whom the media call "Ma's army," he is seldom found to be closely associated with any local business tycoons like his predecessor former KMT Chairman Lee Teng-hui, or with any KMT factions, like KMT Legislative Yuan President Wang Jin-pyng, whom Ma defeated in an open election for the party chairmanship in July. Ma's sobriety and reputation for virtue, however, have generated doubts about whether he has the people and organizational skills to pull factions together, motivate supporters at the grass-roots level, and win island-wide elections.

6. The results of the December 3 elections, however, gave the public the perception that Ma can be flexible and even creative if he wants. "Ma's performance has

been quite surprising the entire way since he began campaigning for the elections," Hsiao Hsu-chen, a "China Times" reporter said, "because he almost single-handedly initiated and determined all KMT campaign strategies." Though it was reportedly not his own initiative, Ma's announcement a few days prior to the election that he would step down if the KMT failed to win a majority of mayoral and magistrate posts astounded the entire pan-Blue camp, as it has never been the KMT's tradition to make such a bold move.

17. Ma's willingness to bet his political career and test his popularity despite the objections of his aides showed that he has started to forge the daring and spirited leadership style expected of a party head. Of greater significance was that this move by Ma changed the race in Keelung City overnight, in which the two pan-Blue candidates - KMT and PFP - were originally running neck-and-neck with each other. Ma's announcement resulted in a sweeping victory for the KMT candidate in Keelung City (a 16% difference in votes) and thereby generated fundamental changes in the partnership between the KMT and the PFP. Ma has never been as keen on the merger between the KMT and PFP as his predecessor former KMT Chairman Lien Chan was. His insistence on following the institution and making 'no concession to and no swapping with' the PFP during the campaigns, combined with his soaring popularity following the KMT's triumph in the December 3 elections, may add clarity to the hazy KMT-PFP relationship. Ma and PFP Chairman James Soong met December 12 and reached an agreement to boost cooperation of the pan-Blue alliance before the two parties formally merge.

18. Ma's mild image and measured style have given people, including some DPP officials, the illusion that he might be easier to deal with than the grim-faced former KMT Chairman Lien Chan. When Ma was elected KMT head in August, both President Chen and former DPP Chairman Su Tseng-chang thought they might be able to work with the KMT more easily to push for the passage of certain stalled bills in the Legislative Yuan, particularly the Special Defense Budget Bill. However, they were disappointed as they soon discovered that Ma can be very stubborn, almost to the point of obsession, regarding procedures.

19. Beijing, too, has found Ma a tough counterpart to talk with as Ma said firmly in an interview with a Hong Kong-based media outlet in early November that "both sides of the Taiwan Strait will not talk about future re-unification as long as Beijing fails to repent for its actions in the June 4 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre." In a separate interview with "Newsweek" in December, Ma did not mention the Tiananmen Square incident but said "at the moment, we don't believe that either side is prepared for unification. The conditions are really not ripe yet" though, for his party, "the eventual goal is reunification."

110. Ma has maintained a certain distance from both former KMT Chairman Lien Chan and PFP Chairman James Soong, as demonstrated in his insistence on following the law and refusing to join Lien, Soong and other outraged pan-Blue supporters in protest outside the Presidential Office in the wake of the pre-2004 March 20 presidential election shooting, in which Chen narrowly defeated Lien. His neutral image attracted centrist voters in Taiwan who despise nasty mud-slinging between political parties.

111. The fact that Ma continues to show respect to former President Lee Teng-hui, the spiritual leader of the Taiwan Solidarity Union, has also made him attractive to some light-green voters. On the night of the KMT's victory in the December 3 elections, Ma's immediate request that pan-Blue voters take the KMT's victory in stride and his pledge to set up an "incorruptibility committee" to monitor the elected KMT mayors and magistrates also helped the KMT's image, which has often been labeled "ossified" and corrupt in the past.

112. DPP Premier Frank Hsieh attributed the DPP's major setbacks in the December 3 elections to the "Ma Ying-jeou phenomenon" or "Ma Ying-jeou charisma," as some observers call it. Sisy Chen, a well-known TV talk show hostess and political commentator in Taiwan, once compared Ma to Michael Jordan, the former NBA star. According to Sisy Chen, Taiwan's elections closely resemble NBA basketball games in the way that voters, like basketball fans, anticipate seeing heroes or stars. Ma is such a star.

113. However, Ma faces some potential crises as a party

leader. For one thing, Ma's popularity is mainly about his personal charisma; it has yet to be transformed into collective action or teamwork. Ever since Ma assumed his post as Taipei City mayor, there has been a constant gap between Ma's approval rating and the approval rating for the whole city government. Some critics interpret this gap as indicating Ma needs to work harder on his management and personnel issues.

14. The KMT party machine remains basically unchanged, and some doubt whether Ma will be able to carry out his plans to truly make the party democratic and transparent or to effect reforms such as disposing of controversial KMT party assets. If the KMT fails to reform under Ma's leadership, he may quickly descend from his current pedestal. Ma also faces the challenges of ridding the KMT of its corrupt, "black-gold" image, truly mobilizing the grassroots pan-Blue supporters, and unifying the entire pan-Blue camp, especially the older generation of KMT members who may be less inclined to support party reforms. Also, as Mainland Affairs Council Joseph Wu pointed out in Washington in early December, Ma has yet to clearly state his position with regard to some major national issues, such as Taiwan's sovereignty and self-defense. As a rising star expected to represent the pan-Blue camp in the 2008 presidential election, Ma's true tests may still lie ahead.

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